

7. IMMIGRANT WOMEN

If you are an immigrant it may seem to you that if you leave your partner no one will stand by you. People from your community might have said to you, “Divorce is not an option in our culture.” Maybe you want to stay with him, but want to ask community members for help. You might assume they will say, “Battering does not happen in our community” or “It is ‘normal’ in our culture.” Not long ago almost everyone in the U.S. agreed with those statements, regardless of their cultures or religions. Until about twenty years ago they said, “Battering doesn’t happen to people like us.” A couple of decades before that, divorce was generally frowned on. Gradually, mainstream attitudes shifted. Many immigrant communities have also adapted their traditional beliefs.

After living in the United States for years many immigrants change. Members of your own community may have begun to realize how dangerous battering can be. Some have learned that for women in danger separation is the only way they can maintain their own safety or that of their children. And even though some denied it for years, many ethnic, religious and national cultures now know there is battering within their own communities. Such changes may be just one way they are becoming Americanized. They might not even realize themselves how much they are adapting to the U.S. culture.

You might believe that “the community” or “our people” always follow certain customs or beliefs. But stop a minute and consider what evidence you have. Does everyone in your culture feel that way? For example, in East Indian communities, marriages are often arranged by families. But sometimes they are not. Or they are arranged in a variety of ways. The woman might not see the prospective groom before the wedding. Or she could meet him several times and approve the marriage. There are families in which the mother-in-law rules the roost and even abuses her daughter-in-law. In others she does not interfere with her son’s family at all. A woman who divorces her abusive husband may be banished from her extended family. Yet another family may welcome her back.

Count the number of people who have actually expressed their opinion on the topic of battering. How many have told you what they think about men controlling their wives? About divorce? About calling police when a woman is in danger? Maybe you can only be sure of what a small number of people believe. In general conversations with friends you can watch for opportunities to raise the topic of marital violence. Listen carefully to the responses to your questions. Some opinions might surprise you. Keep listening until you find someone who understands the problem in the same way you do.

Whether you stay with your husband or leave, life in the United States will be easier if you learn English. Maybe your husband has prevented you from doing that. It may seem an overwhelming task to persuade him it is a good idea or to attend a class secretly. To find a school you can afford and learn English may seem

impossible. But if your children are in school, you may be able to enlist their help. A few important phrases, like “help!” and your name and address, and “My husband hit me” and “I speak...(whatever language)” can make a crucial difference, and may even save your life.

Battered Immigrant Women Adapt to New Lives

It can be hard to hold onto your own ethnic and cultural values while you also try to adapt to this new country. You might feel upset when your children take on the customs of schoolmates. Worry about their American habits can increase your fear of getting along on your own. Maybe you feel as if you will never learn English, or find your way around the city or be able to get a job. So it is important to learn as much as you can about your options in this culture. Farhiya, an advocate for immigrant women, tells how one refugee woman I’ll call Maryam used the services at Farhiya’s agency to increase her options and change her life.

“Maryam had only been in the United States eight months and her husband was abusing her. She was “countryside” and had never been to school. She lived in another state where she called 911 and her husband was put in jail. But she had five children, the youngest eight months. The other ones were under four and a half. Maryam’s friends sent her money and told her to come here (to the agency). They showed her how to take a bus to this new place and she left her home state.

“She didn’t know how to write even in her own language, so first she had to learn how to hold a pencil. She didn’t know how to take the bus, or how to use a car. It was very hard. She didn’t even know what food she could buy, because she couldn’t read.

“But now Maryam is going by herself to the bus, taking her kids to school, has learned English and has her own home. She knows how to get a money order and pay her bills. She can manage everything by herself. Before, with her husband, she could not do any of it.”

Farhiya, the advocate, knows the struggles of women like Maryam because she came to the U.S. as a refugee herself when she spoke no English. She had to learn some of the same things as Maryam.

Maria, like many immigrant women, was surprised to learn that U.S. laws and customs are different from those in her home country. She grew up in Mexico and was twenty years old when she gave birth to a baby boy. The father’s family wanted him to have custody of the baby. Afraid that Mexican law and the father’s family money would make it impossible for her to keep the baby, Maria escaped to the U.S., where she picked fruit for many years. She married and had four more children, but her husband beat her.

She didn’t realize custody laws are different here, and was afraid her children could be taken away from her. After 23 years of marriage she found help at Las

Amigas, a project that helps abused women. She left her husband, and maintained custody of her two teenaged children. Then she learned more about the law and took training to help other women. This is what Maria says about legal issues and her life now:

“So many women don’t know the law. At Las Amigas we work in the Hispanic community and tell women about the rights that females have. Sometimes the husbands kick them out of their houses and we find shelters for them. We have an office but our cars are really our offices because there are hardly any buses for women to come to us. We go to the community instead of waiting for them to come to us.”

Like Maryam and Maria and other abused women, what you have already been through has probably made you stronger than you realize. Most likely you are brave enough to stand on your own and create your own safe haven. But the great thing is that you will not have to stand alone. An entire movement against violence to women stands with you.

Adapted from Getting Free (www.Powell's.com)